



COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

Department of Health

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STATE HEALTH COMMISSIONER

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Dear Clinician,

Last year I sent a letter regarding the unfortunate consequences resulting from frequent delays in the signing of death certificates for the some 50,000 natural deaths that occur in Virginia every year. Today, I want to take a moment to share important details of new death certification-related regulations that take effect July 1. This correspondence is designed to help you with the death certification process.

The following regulations apply effective July 1, 2011:

- Supervised nurse practitioners and physician assistants may now determine cause of death and sign death certificates provided they have access to decedent's medical history and the death is due to natural causes.
- Physicians specializing in the delivery of health care to hospitalized or emergency department patients who are employed by or engaged by the facility where the death occurred are now specifically named in the Code of Virginia as physicians who may complete and sign a death certificate.
- A physician, nurse practitioner, or physician assistant who determines the cause of death and signs the death certificate, in the absence of gross negligence or willful misconduct, is immune from civil liability.

As many of you may know from personal experience with the death of a loved one, the death certificate serves many purposes for the survivors of the deceased. These new changes will ease the process of settling necessary affairs that require a completed death certificate such as:

- Burial or cremation
- Accessing and/or closing bank accounts
- Probation of a will
- Estate settlement

A short presentation including details regarding these updates and an overview of how to complete a death certificate in Virginia can be found at the following address:

<https://covkc.agencies.virginia.gov/vdh/courses/Clinicians/deathcertificationcourse/player.html>.

To earn free CME for this course, register with TRAINVirginia at <https://va.train.org> and search for the course **VDH: Death Certification - Your Final Act of Patient Care, Course ID 1024796**.

Local health district directors are your primary point of contact for questions about natural death certificate completion. Their contact information can be found at <http://www.vdh.state.va.us/lhd/>.

Questions concerning possible medical examiner cases should be directed to the District Office of the Chief Medical Examiner serving your locality.

Thank you for joining me to make a difference in the lives of all Virginians faced with the loss of a loved one by taking the time to review the death certification process and carrying through on this important act of patient care. Please share this letter widely with other colleagues who may benefit from this information.

Sincerely,
Karen Remley, MD, MBA, FAAP
State Health Commissioner